

An English girl's recollections of school days in Russia over 65 years ago ( 1904-10 )

by

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Much is written about the deterioration of Education in England with which I agree! I was delighted to read, quite recently, some extracts in the The Daily Telegraph - ideas of the Provost of University College, London ( my College of many years ago ).

Among his fine ideas, Lord Annan says that "some boys and girls are better educated than 40 years ago", so I am tempted to give an idea of the excellent education I received over 65 years ago, in a country which is not supposed to be as "up to date" in most ways as England, namely South Russia ( the Ukraine ) where I spent 16 of the formative years of life. I owe success in my career to the exceptional foundation I received. My parents were English. When I was three years old my father took up a long-term engineering appointment with a British Firm in Russia. It was a mining area and early education was done by private tuition, or at primary schools. Further education after 11 years of age had to be sought in larger cities.

It was then my parents had to make a decision: either to send me to boarding school in England, with problems of long travel and holidays to arrange for, or to seek admission to a good boarding school in Russia.



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There were four good boarding schools - known as "Ladies' College" - in Leningrad, Moscow, Poltava, and Kharkov. These schools were under the patronage of the Tzar's mother Maria Feodorovna. There were about 250 boarders at Kharkov, which was the one nearest to Hughesoffska (later known as Stalino) where we lived.

You had to pass a stiff entrance examination at 11 years which included a good knowledge of French and German as well as Russian. English was not taught then, so I had lengthy English lessons at home from the age of 4 years, and during the holidays, until I left school.

Handwriting and Arithmetic had to be good. Algebra and Geometry were started at the College and pursued throughout the 7-year course, as were Physics, Biology, Botany, History and Geography; also Art, Singing, Needlework and Music; and, of course, Physical Education.

If you entered Kharkov College, you had to make up your mind to take an interest in your work and cultivate the habit of attention! If no attention was paid to lessons, with fidgeting in desks, etc., the child became bored through not being "with it".

A Form-mistress sat in class during all lessons to see that discipline was maintained. These lessons were given by eminent professors from the University. They were very good teachers, and could impart knowledge without having to deal with discipline.

When a girl was called upon to give a verbal account of the home-work, she went from her desk to the teacher's desk before reciting the homework and answering questions. Marks were given by the teacher and entered on the student's record card which was kept by the Form-mistress. 7 was a "scrape pass". A maximum of 12 was difficult to attain.



The first four girls out of a class of 35 were taken to the Opera or Ballet. I heard Caruso in Pagliacci and Shaliapin in Life for the Tzar and Boris Godunof.

The school had two beautiful halls for dancing and recreation. We had a half-hour physical training class every morning and dancing lessons twice a week. There were games for an hour in the afternoon ( in longish dresses - not in shorts! ).

The classrooms were good. The dining-room had refectory-type tables, presided over by the Form-mistresses ( the Principal sat at the head of a Senior table ). Food was good, except during Lent ( especially Fridays! ). We usually spent Easter at school, and at midnight there would be a special service after a procession with lit candles to the chapel. The priest would call out at the door, "Christ has risen", and from within a voice would answer, "Verily He has risen". As we entered, each pupil was greeted personally by the priest with a kiss. Then, in the early hours of the morning, the fast would be broken and we would have a substantial breakfast including a slice of decorated Saffron cake - the "paskha".

Each Form had two Form-mistresses: a German-speaking one and a French-speaking one, on alternate days. On the German day we had to speak that language all day, and at meal times; the same on the French day. We were allowed to speak Russian on Saturdays and Sundays! No wonder we became fluent in 3 languages!

Letter-writing home was supervised on Sundays. These werenot censored, but a mistress walked round to make sure they were neatly written.



'Uniform' was a closely-fitted ankle-length dress of Alpaca - quite attractive, but of course different in style to modern dress-ideas! In the two Senior Forms the colour was maroon. We wore a white pinafore dress of fine linen over the heavier dress, and a white linen "cape". For special occasions the "cape" was discarded and the top of the dress was "decolte" - with a frill round it.

Each term when we arrived, we had to pack away all our own clothes, and, after a Turkish Bath ( a weekly event ) and a medical "check-up", we put on school uniform and the school underwear of very fine white linen ( so cold in Winter! ).

The special "decolte" uniform was worn at the annual Ball ( to which male students of the nearby University were invited ). It was also worn when members of the Tzar's family visited us. This happened twice while I was there. I clearly remember these events; little Alexis was present, as well as his sisters, Olga, Tatiana, Maria and Anastasia, and Tzarina Alexandra. The 250 girls sang "God Save the Tzar" and curtsayed as we filed past the Tzar's family. ( We sang "God Save the Tzar" after every Sunday service in the school chapel - to the tune of an English hymn.)

By the time I reached the top Form, I noticed a group of girls taking a keen interest in politics. They said they were "Socialists" and revolutionaries and wore little red bows under their capes. They remained silent during the singing of the anthem - just moving their lips if the Form-mistress glanced in their direction.



In 1909 - 1910 the Tzar's family came to the school for a church service; they must have been visiting Kiev for the celebrations that year. The Tzar was away on government business.

Those who kept the top or second position for the whole year and the seven-year period, and did well in the Final Examinations, were rewarded with a Gold or Silver medal of the Tzar Nicholas II. One side of the medal ( nearly 2" in diameter ) had the face of the Tzar; the other side, a vineyard, with an inscription in Russian: "Lord bless this vineyard" ( presumably of learning ).

When, in July 1910, the newspapers announced the results of the Final Matriculation Examinations they stated that Evelyn, daughter of Adolph While, had been awarded the Gold Medal - the first foreigner to have gained one! Father was thrilled and warmly congratulated by his Russian engineers. It was worth getting it to see the pleasure it gave him!

I was accepted by University College, London, for a degree in Modern Languages ( French and German ). I spent the Summer holidays of 1912 in Russia - the last time I was there.